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THE CRAYON.

VOL. III.

FEBRUARY.

PART II.

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PUBLICATION OFFICE, 763 BROADWAY.

NATURE AND USE OF BEAUTY.

CHAPTER II.

THE NATURE OF BEAUTY—THE THEORIES OF ITS MATERIALITY.

In investigating the nature of the Beautiful, philosophers have, we believe, generally erred in depending on their intellectual perceptions in tracing those emotions which Beauty gives rise to. Unwilling to trust themselves to the, to them, varying and unmathematical basis of feeling, they have demanded a material chain of sequences, beyond which they would not venture into pure sensation—and which must, necessarily, depend from a material final cause; and they have, therefore, sought for Beauty in the emotions to which they could assign visible causes. Some have insisted that it is from association with our pleasures only, that certain objects seem to us more attractive than others; i. e., that Beauty is not really Beauty, but a suggestiveness of past delight. It is true, that a mother's face is to the child the most beautiful on earth, but by and by comes one, seen for the first time, and yet far more beautiful. It is true, that objects, which, to one, are of the most commonplace, to another are full of interest, on account of some blessed memories connected therewith; and every one who has been happy enough to have been reared in a home-stead, loves it above all places which his youth knew, and yet there is always a mental admission that some other place is, abstractly, more beautiful; and, between two places or things, in themselves equal in measure of personal interest, we shall, unavoidably, have a preference for one as superior in point of Beauty. But this indication of the associative theory is worth noting, for future use; viz., that agreeable association excites love toward the associated object.

Nor are they more fortunate who insist, as many do, that we regulate our ideas of the beautiful by custom, although it is true, that in matters of fashion, and, to a great extent, in all low Art, we are controlled in our tastes by the opinions and example of others; but the further we pass from things of common uses, with respect to which, as being of use, we permit ourselves great de-

parture from ideality, to those which, being of no recognizable utility to us as subservient to life, we feel to exist for some loftier purpose to us unknown, we permit ourselves less licence of variation to suit our momentary whims, so that fashion and custom lose their power over our tastes in all nobler Art. The domain of fashion, embracing that of physical uses, ends with the limits of personal gratification, either of sense, or the feeling of pride and ostentation; it is a domain governed purely by human whims, subject to no law but that of individual preference; and the instant we pass beyond this, and stand on the threshold of the immortal and universal—the eternal and immutable, we are conscious of the insignificance of human authority, and the fragility of human standards, and abase our tastes and individual preferences before a law of Beauty, incomprehensible, absolute, and infallible. Tailors and milliners may clip, and foolishly contrive with their silks and cloths, but before the divine Beauty, the irreverent hand is palsied, and the unbelieving eye blind.

Yet custom has this force, that it deadens repugnance, and intensifies pleasure, when it is pure in its nature. Children reared by negro nurses, lose all the child's horror of a black face, and the nurse's face may even become exceedingly pleasing, but the child, when arrived at maturity, will none the less consider the Circassian more beautiful than the Ethiopian. A beautiful wife's face grows each day more beautiful to her husband, but it is because he has learned to read it more deeply, and understand more fully the spiritual beauty, and the love expressed by it; and if it be really,* that is, interiorly, beautiful, the deeper his reading of it, the more intense will be his admiration and love of her. In the case of filial regard, custom operates in both these directions, leading the child to overlook the faults of the parent, from being long accustomed to them, as some shells coat with pearl all harsh, foreign substances

which are by chance received into them; and, at the same time, enabling it to see beauties hidden from casual observation. There is still another effect of custom, not, perhaps, necessarily to be considered here, yet significant in this connection, which is its assimilation of a mind (and even thence the external appearance) of a person to the things habitually regarded, and thus producing affection for such objects from the likeness. From this cause, people reared in a hilly country find the lowlands intolerable, and *vice versa*. Yet this is not at all to be confounded with the perception of Beauty, which, though it may be deformed and perverted, as well as developed, by custom, in all cases preserves its essential individuality, and manifests its presence by the energy with which it resists perversion, and by its vitality, even when deformed. We have found, however, that like association, custom induces love.

The fulfillment of function is the ultimate cause assigned by another class of philosophers, to the sensations of Beauty. In this cause Beauty is use, a proposition which, taken at its common acceptation, would be readily confuted by any thoughtful mind; since, in that case, an iron cook-stove, which performs the double function of cooking and heating, is more beautiful than a gracefully-designed parlor-stove, which only warms us. We shall think promptly of many things, in which you can conceive no purpose beyond mere existence—for which you can suggest no use whatever, but which, nevertheless, are very beautiful; and the most glorious things in Nature are utterly incomprehensible in this respect. We may watch the clouds of a summer afternoon—dull, grey, and, to most eyes, uninteresting—their only use being felt in the dust-laying rain they shed, or their cool intervening between us and the sun, yet, for neither function, do we love them the more. Yet wait until the sun and wind have gone down; and the vapors, drifting above the purple horizon, catch the waning light, and portion it out among them as if in magnificent play, some robing themselves in its scarlet, some in orange, and others still in purple and gold, and so, in heavenly beauty and pomp, they bear their long procession across the pale blue sky, and then we shall thank God

* We are aware that this is over-stepping the limit we had set for our present investigation, which is the consideration of visible quality of Beauty; yet this interior, or spiritual Beauty, which we shall consider presently, is really expressed by forms, lines, and colors, and, therefore, when considered as a result shown in the face, subject to our present thought.

that the clouds are more than rain-bearers, or sun-veils. Wait a little longer still, and they float across the twilight sky in cold, dull grey, leaden, and from which we turn away, repelled by the ungenial hue. In all these changes the cloud has performed its functional qualities; yet, while we loved it in its gladness, we shrunk from its gloom.

There is, however, a modification of this theory of function, which approaches much more closely to a final solution of the problem, were it not that it begs the question, by assuming that there are uses in the object itself, the just performance of which is indicated by health and harmony of organization, and of which we do not become conscious by any rational process; and that the sensations of Beauty are simply instinctive, and *unconscious* recognitions of those uses. It then maintains that the higher the function, the further it is removed from rational comprehension, and thence from the perception of the nature of its use, and the further it is carried into the region of unintellectual or instinctive apprehension. Therefore the more elevated the quality of Beauty, arising from dignity of use, the more its impression partakes of the nature of sensation, and the less of thought. This position is strengthened by instancing certain beautiful forms, in which Beauty and fitness for use are eminently combined. Thus, in the human figure, the most refined beauty of form is shown in those parts which have the most wonderful adaptation to use, as in the hand, the lines of which, in perfect examples, are combinations of the most exquisite curves, in such variety and harmony of arrangement that no human eye can follow, or mind estimate, their infinite subtlety and subtle infinity; nor is its adaptation for function less marvellous. So in the lines of a ship, there is the same union of Beauty with promise of speed, and in the swiftest clippers, the water-lines are as chaste and refined in their curvature as the draperies of Fra Angelico, while in the slow and clumsy craft of past times, the lines are coarse and graceless.

Yet, because the human form contains at once the most perfect fitness for use, and the highest known manifestation of Beauty, it does not follow that the two qualities are one, but that the unity of Divine design carries them to perfection together from the necessities of the law of its working; and if it so happens that the "hollow lines" of our new system of ship-building are the most beautiful lines the skill of man has ever contrived, it is not because they make the swiftest ships, but because, in the economy of creation, it so occurs that the lines

of highest speed and greatest beauty coincide. The hand, nervous and sinewy, is not beautiful, comparatively, yet proclaims its function more clearly, perhaps, than one much more perfectly developed; and the line which is beautiful in the ship is no less so on paper, where no idea of its purpose is given, so that in the highest instances of perceived function,* it and Beauty are at variance. Beside this, there is a beauty of abstract lines and colors where they indicate nothing—we speak of the relative beauty of two inscriptions of the same letter of the alphabet in different hand-writings, and of the beautiful tint of a chance wash of water-color where it is pure and refined.

Moreover, if the promise of function were the root of Beauty, all things which indicate their functions equally well would be equally beautiful—a blade of grass as a white lily—the Hottentot Venus as the Venus of Milos—the face of a monkey as the face of a child, a position which every man's soul revolts against, if he has a genuine feeling of Beauty; and the only result of the confirmation of this theory would be, that it would be proved that there is no external Beauty apart from physical perfection, and, consequently, if we may be permitted, for the sake of a *ratio ad absurdum*, to pass into the mental world for an instant, that there is no mental Beauty beside a perfect fitness for a certain office, so that a good hod-carrier is as worthy, or as beautiful a man as an equally good poet—equally *necessary* we admit, but equal in point of beauty? oh no!

Burke, without attempting to refer the Beautiful to a final cause, states, as a proposition the result of his theory, that the beautiful is founded on mere positive pleasure, and excites in the soul that feeling which is called "love," and in this respect we have found that the influences which have been confounded with Beauty, have in general agreed, and this agreement affords one important indication as to the true direction of our search. It is that Beauty stimulates to love for the object in which it manifests itself—and we are sure that no one can dwell thoughtfully on the subject with-

out confirming this characteristic;* but the perception of function, or promise of function, excites no feeling more intense than admiration and intellectual delight in the perfection of the fitness for function displayed by the object regarded. And here is one thing to be considered as very important in our investigation—that in all the Divine work there is such a combination of admirable and lovely qualities, addressing themselves to the different attributes of the human mind, and furnishing various kinds of delight,—that a mind which feels intensely without the power or habit of analyzing its emotions closely, will oftentimes refer all the delight received from the various sources, to that quality which it feels most strongly. Thus an artist in whom the spirit of mechanism is largely developed, will have an intense pleasure in all excellent contrivance, and an admiration for its manifestation in Divine work so keen, that the distinctive quality of Beauty is lost sight of. And this will be the case especially in the study of the human form, and to a certain extent in all animal life, where the line of Beauty coincides so nearly with that of function that none but the keenest analyst could perceive that the former was not the shade of the latter. In men of great mechanical ability, and a high sense of the ideas of vitality and power, this will be almost necessarily the case, even where there is absolute sensation of Beauty, from the fact that no human mind can hold two strong emotions at the same time, without that one shall yield precedence to, and become in a great measure lost in, the other, so that in fact it shall seem to do little else than heighten the greater. Nevertheless, the emotions derived from the sensation of Beauty and the perception of Function, are radically different: the former being an emotion of pure love, the latter, one of admiration;† and love is moral, while admiration is in-

* Place yourself before an object of nature wherein men recognize Beauty, and observe what takes place within you at the sight of this object. Is it not certain that, at the same time that you judge that it is beautiful, you also feel its beauty? that is to say, that you experience at the sight of it a delightful emotion, and that you are attracted toward this object by a sentiment of sympathy and love? In other cases you judge otherwise, and feel an opposite sentiment. Aversion accompanies the judgment of the ugly as love accompanies the judgment of the beautiful . . . As often as you give birth within me to the idea of the beautiful, you give me an internal and exquisite joy, always followed by a sentiment of love for the object that caused it.—*M. Victor Cousin. "Philosophy of the True, Beautiful, and Good."*

† "We live by admiration, hope, and love." We wish to be always understood as using the word "admiration" in its purest sense; wonder at the excellence of the thing admired, and thus widely distinguished from love.

* It cannot be permitted the advocates of this system to extend the meaning of the term use (or function) indefinitely, since such permission would evade every true issue in the range of the discussion. That is of use to us which is subservient to our existence—what we live for is not of use to us, but we to it. Ideas are useful to us when they assist us to attain our purposes—if we devote ourselves to the elaboration of the Idea, we are its servitors—God himself may be said to be of use to us in one sense, since he confers benefits on us, but the essential idea of utility, as this theory regards it, is subservient to our personal advantage.

tellectual. Take the simplest instance in the world—a wild flower which an artist or a happy child will pluck from a delight in its beauty—if indeed the love they bear it will permit the plucking of it—and see how tenderly they will hold it, every motion indicating sympathy and love; but let a botanist pick it up, or the thought of the “promise of function” come to the artist who holds it, and see how instantly all sense of its delicate tintings and exquisitely cut edges disappears before the analysis, while its leaves are scattered, and stamen and pistil are broken away, that we may get down to the carpel, and understand its vital economy! So of the study of the human figure;—what emotion of Beauty has the anatomist who gathers the profoundest knowledge of function, with relation and action of parts? His admiration and thence reverence of the great Constructor may be intense, but no love arises thence for the beauty of the human organism. Or what artist, at the sight of a beautiful woman, believes that the emotion her beauty gives him arises from any perception or instinct of health, or promise of function! Does not, indeed, this delight in pure, external beauty so possess those who are peculiarly sensitive to it, that oftentimes healthful physical organization and even mental beauty are lost sight of under its fascination. Further than this, we believe, that so long as the artist is content to dwell on this pure sensation of Beauty he enjoys it more, and becomes more capable of expressing it than if he were possessed with any thought of function or interior construction; nay, the instant he goes, either in inquiry or knowledge, beneath the surface, he leaves the province of pure Beauty; and therefore, that Anatomy, while it heightens the delight of the faculties which take cognizance of structure and contrivance, and carries admiration to nobler heights, obscures Beauty, and overpowers the sentiment which it produces. It is certain that among artists, those who have attained the highest experience of the beautiful knew nothing whatever of anatomy, and were evidently men in whom thought was comparatively inactive, while sentiment was dominant. This is analogically recognized in the disinclination of those who are most fully animated by Beauty to look into the causes of it; in their aversion to reasoning on those sensations which they receive from the beautiful, and preferring always to be guided by their unbiassed instincts, rarely being able to give a reason for their sentiment or their action. Thus Emerson, perhaps the most suggestively poetic of our philosophers, says,* that no man can tell

the cause of Beauty, and that “no reason can be asked or given why the soul seeks beauty” (*Essay on Nature*). He would have been nearer to the truth, if he had said that no man can tell the cause of it, and at the same time preserve the enjoyment of it, as, like the image in water, it vanishes at the first attempt to examine it; and they who value it as a sentiment had better neglect its rationale. Nor should we care to undertake this discussion as a matter of science, but with the hope to point out some way by which the *sensations* of Beauty may be strengthened rather than the *knowledge* of it, as an abstraction, cultivated. So far as the individual artist or his work is concerned it does not matter in the least whether he knew the exact nature of the impressions of the beautiful he had received; if he were capable of analyzing them perfectly his works would be none the more beautiful for that capacity; but it is possible that correct views of them might influence his mental cultivation; and if, indeed, Beauty be dependent on external causes, he has only to care for *them*; if it be from promise of function, he has only to study into function and its expression, and the more fully he comprehends the uses of things, the higher will be his attainment of the forms of Beauty; but if, as we believe, it comes from a deeper source, the deepest depth of his heart—the very inmost of his moral nature, there is need that he purify the fountain of life—that his conceptions may come up from its clearness, pure and radiant.

CHAPTER III.

THE THEORY OF THE DIVINITY OF BEAUTY.

WE have, we believe, established two positions—first, that the term beautiful, as we understand it, acts in comparison, since nothing is devoid of beauty, nor is anything entirely beautiful. If we regard two specimens of any production of nature, differing perceptibly, we invariably feel of one of them that it is more beautiful than the other—that is, it approaches more nearly to a certain conception we have of the perfection of the species of things to which it belongs—not a more perfect example seen, but a development conceived, manifesting all the essential qualities of the species in a single specimen, produced under those circumstances which assisted most powerfully its effort toward perfection. This conception we call the ideal of the species.* Beauty, therefore, in all

* The perfect *idea* of the form and condition in which all the properties of the species are fully developed, is called the ideal of the species.—*Modern Painters*.

But above real beauty is a beauty of another order—ideal beauty. The ideal resides neither

cases, not only has a positive power of giving delight in the individual cases, but, by the degrees of this delight, carries the mind through a series of successively higher and higher expressions of itself, *towards* a point unattainable, invisible for ever. The second position that we consider established, is that the manifestations of Beauty excite in us love, a purely moral emotion, having no root in the intellectual powers. But we found (chap. i.) “that the quality in the flower which we call beauty, is a type or correspondence of that which, in the soul, we call beauty,” and that the sentiment arising from the sensations of Beauty in inanimate nature, is identical with that which we receive from moral Beauty, and they must, therefore, be referable to a common cause: Those qualities in the soul which we love, and concerning which we predicate Beauty, are those which we class together as the virtues, or, in the abstract, goodness:—the Beauty of the soul is, then, Goodness. As in the ideal of the external, there is a general indication, by degrees, of moral Beauty, of a moral ideal—a manifestation of goodness which we have not seen, but conceive from the imperfect examples we have seen, a perfection we feel we can never attain, but which, nevertheless, we feel a duty to struggle towards, in opposition to the circumstances and influences which tend to repress the development of that ideal of ourselves, which we feel in our better moments, and which we are always conscious *may be*. But the following of this ideal carries us on to a common centre of goodness—the ideal Good,† which is God, from whom we feel all goodness to come, and in the likeness to whom is all moral Beauty. The goodness of God we comprehend again to be from his infinite Love, which manifests itself to us in this form, and thence it is that we recognize moral beauty to be the expression of goodness, which is the form in which Love makes itself known; (and thence also that the emotion we have towards Beauty even in the abstract, is love, the effect, in all cases, corresponding to the cause—like begetting like). But moral beauty is visible, and subject of Art—it moulds the faces of

in an individual, nor in a collection of individuals. Nature or experience furnishes us the occasion of conceiving it, but it is essentially distinct. Let it once be conceived, and all natural figures, though now so beautiful, are only images of a superior beauty which they do not realize.—*M. Victor Cousin, Philosophy of the True, &c.*

† At the extreme limits of the intellectual world is the Ideal of the Good, which is perceived with difficulty; but, in fine, cannot be perceived without concluding that it is the source of all that is beautiful and good.—*Plato, The Republic*.

* In a recent lecture delivered at Brooklyn.

those in whom it is given*—it affects the lines, and forms, and motions of our material organization—we see it, and paint it, and sculpture it, *and any particular form of external beauty is, therefore, the image of the moral beauty from which it proceeds.*

Goodness, then, takes form, visible, reproducible, and as Goodness itself is the manifestation of Love, that quality of form which we call Beauty, is the visible appearance of Love—which, in its supreme being, with Wisdom supreme, is God. We have hitherto, for the sake of demonstration, admitted a distinction between moral and material beauty—that is, between the beauty which appeals to the spiritual perception, and that which addresses itself to the physical sense—but there is really no such distinction; for there is but one Beauty, as there is but one Love.† There may be Beauty manifested by human goodness, or, morality, and it is there the quality of the soul made sensible in the material body, by the same lines, forms, and colors which would be felt as beautiful in the inanimate world, where they are seen without any reference to the expression of moral qualities in the beautiful object, but the Beauty is essentially the same, being in the former case human goodness, visible and recognized as *goodness*, while in the latter it is the direct result of divine goodness acting on matter in creation. The Beauty is, in neither case, the goodness, but the

* But of the sweetness which that higher serenity, (of happiness) and the dignity which that higher authority (of divine law, and not of human reason) can and must stamp on the features, it would be futile to speak here at length, for I suppose that both are acknowledged on all hands, and that there is not any beauty but theirs, to which men pay long obedience: at all events, if not by sympathy discovered, it is not in words explicable with what divine lines and lights the exercise of goodness and charity will mould and gild the hardest and coldest countenance, neither to what darkness their departure will consign the loveliest. For there is not any virtue the exercise of which even momentarily will not impress a new fairness upon the features, neither on them only, but on the whole body, both the intelligence and the moral faculties have operation, for where all the movement and gestures, however slight, are different in their modes, according to the mind that governs them, and on the gentleness and decision of just feeling, there follows a grace of action, and through continuance of this a grace of form, which, by no discipline, may be taught or attained.

† We have divided beauty into three great classes—physical beauty, intellectual beauty, and moral beauty. We must now seek the unity of these three sorts of beauty. Now we think that they resolve themselves into one and the same beauty, moral beauty; meaning by that, with moral beauty, properly so called, all spiritual beauty.

Form cannot be simply a form, then—it must be the form of something. Physical beauty is then the sign of an internal beauty, which is spiritual and moral beauty; and this is the foundation, the principle, the unity of the beautiful.—*Cousin, Philosophy of the True, &c.*

result which it produces, and since all goodness is the same in essence—that is Love, it follows that Beauty must be always the same.

Since man is made in the image of God, it follows that every attribute of Deity has its corresponding trait in Humanity, but as we do not predicate virtue or morality of Him, but Goodness, it is evident that the virtues are correspondent to the different manifestations of the divine Goodness—like as print and type—they are type and antetype. But the universe is an image of God also, and every attribute of Him must also have its expression in forms of the material creation. Every distinct appearance in Nature must be the product of a correspondingly distinct attribute of the divine Being;* and this is evident even by a material law; for how shall anything be produced without that it shall indicate its origin? do not the mathematical faculties produce a mathematical problem, and does not this problem perpetually proclaim what faculties gave it birth? Does not the musical mind produce harmony and melody rather than form and color, and so of every faculty we recognize in man, have they not all their distinct products by which we may know at once the quality of mental action involved in their evolution? But whence is this law of our working if not from the corresponding law of His working? Is it not clear, then, that if we take the universe as proclaiming Him as its Creator, and it proclaims Him fully, that every distinct form of creation demands a distinct cause in Him?

But in all that we really accomplish the motive of Love lies at the bottom of our working. Love, in some kind, animates every action that we perform, moulds it and gives it its final shape, as appears from the consideration that everything we do worthily we do for some good, or for Goodness' sake, and for the love we bear

* I wonder at the folly of those who, in order to know God better, consider Him, they say, in his pure and absolute essence, disengaged from all limitative determinations. * * * No; it is not true that the diversity of determinations, and consequently of qualities and attributes, destroys the absolute unity of a being; the infallible proof of it is, that my unity is not the least in the world altered by the diversity of my faculties. It is not true that unity excludes multiplicity, and multiplicity unity; for unity and multiplicity are united in one. Why should they not be in God? Moreover, far from altering unity in one, multiplicity develops it, and makes its productiveness appear. So the richness of the determinations and the attributes of God is exactly the sign of the plenitude of his being. To neglect his attributes is, therefore, to impoverish Him; we do not say enough; it is to annihilate him; for a being without attributes exists not; and the abstraction of being, human, divine, finite or infinite, relative or absolute, is nonentity.—*Cousin.*

those for whom we do it—if for self, from the love of self; if for humanity, from the love of humanity—and thus the *form* of every mental action is determined by Love; and, in like manner does every work of the great Artist bear in its form the evidence of the operation of His love, which, to the mind, is Goodness; to the sense, Beauty; which is, finally, therefore, nothing else than the appearance in all created things of the infinite Love, which, in its goodness to us, made them what they are for our enjoyment, and as instruments to perfect us in His likeness.* It may seem strange, and even absurd, to attempt to demonstrate that a purely material effect is produced by a purely spiritual cause; yet, what is the whole world but such effect from such cause? and if our processes of reasoning have been just, and there has been no break in the chain of sequences by which we have arrived at that point, there remains no other conclusion possible than that the divine Love, the principle of the divine Goodness, is visible, and not in a figurative or spiritual sense, but physically visible, in creation; and that its appearance is the quality in God's work, which we call Beauty. In the following chapter we shall proceed to the confirmations of this theory of the divinity of Beauty, to be found in the writings of philosophers, who have devoted themselves to the subject.

* If all beauty covers a moral beauty, if the ideal mounts unceasingly towards the infinite, Art, which expresses ideal beauty, purifies the soul in elevating it toward the infinite, that is to say, toward God.

True beauty is ideal beauty, and ideal beauty is a reflection of the infinite. So, independently of all official alliance with religion and morals, Art is by itself essentially religious and moral; for far from wanting its own law, its own genius, it everywhere expresses in its works eternal beauty. Bound on all sides to matter by inflexible laws, working upon inanimate stone, upon uncertain and fugitive sounds, upon words of limited and finite signification, Art communicates to them with the precise form that is addressed to such or such a sense, a mysterious character, which is addressed to the imagination and the soul, takes them away from reality, and bears them sweetly or violently into unknown regions. Every work of Art, whatever may be its form, small or great, figured, sung, or uttered—every work of Art truly beautiful or sublime—throws the soul into a gentle or severe reverie that elevates it toward the infinite. The infinite is the common limit after which the soul aspires upon the wings of imagination as well as reason, by the route of the sublime and beautiful, as well as by that of the true and good. The emotion that the beautiful produces turns the soul from this world; it is the beneficent emotion which Art produces for humanity.—*Cousin.*